

The *Journal of the National Medical Association* encourages readers to send Health Tidbit topic suggestions to Editorial Services Manager Kim Taylor at [ktaylor@nmanet.org](mailto:ktaylor@nmanet.org).

## Diet Tips Help the Elderly

Joye Carter, MD

While the link to good nutrition and long life have been well documented over the years, relatively no steps have been taken to put healthy dietary changes in the wellness plans for senior citizens. Now, all of that is changing, thanks to the intervention of Medicare. In January 2002, Medicare began paying for registered dietitians to help treat more than seven million seniors with diabetes or renal diseases. These are the diseases most often considered to be associated with poor diet.

About 85% of senior citizens suffer from at least one chronic disease and could benefit from nutritional intervention. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, for instance, may be exacerbated by the ingestion of sugary foods. The extra glucose causes the patient to increase their respiratory effort in order to expel more CO<sub>2</sub> produced by the extra glucose. Other issues that are unique to the elderly are situations like whether or not the surviving spouse knows how to cook, or if the grieving process leads to a loss of the will to live, the patient may, in fact, starve to death.

Another way in which a nutritionist could help is when the medical therapy decreases the senior's appetite or food begins to taste funny, the nutritionist may be able to suggest healthy alterna-

tive foods that will keep the patient in better health to ward off infections and stabilize chronic ailments.

For more information contact the Website for senior citizens: [www.aafp.org/nsi](http://www.aafp.org/nsi)

## Understaffed Nursing Homes Affecting Patients

David Hefner

Patients in most nursing homes are not receiving proper care due to a shortage of workers, a new federal study found.

Patients with the least number of nursing home workers were more likely to suffer from bedsores, malnutrition, weight loss, dehydration, pneumonia and serious blood-borne infections.

The report was ordered by Congress, prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services and recently reported in *The New York Times*.

Despite the news that more than 90% of America's nursing homes had too few workers, the Bush administration does not plan to pour billions of dollars per year needed to increase the staff numbers.

Instead, the administration is hoping the problem will be resolved through "market forces and more efficient use of existing nurses and nurse's aides," the *Times* reported. The administration hopes to release data to the public about the seriousness of the issue in hopes that an "informed

public" will demand, among other things, better management practices within the industry.

## Reference

1. Pear, Robert. "9 of 10 Nursing Homes Lack Adequate Staff, Study Finds." *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2002.

## Season and Suicide

Amber Williams

Sunshine may attribute to increased instances of suicide, according to a study from the Harvard School of Public Health. The study explores this hypothesis by comparing the suicide rates of 20 countries with the amount of sunshine on a monthly basis. The report concludes that there is an association between the increase in suicides and the total sunshine in each country. The researchers determined that instances of suicide are highest near June in the northern hemisphere and about December in the southern hemisphere.

An article in the newspaper, the Korea Herald this month confirms that there is a seasonal pattern in suicide rates in South Korea. They report that the highest number of suicides last year was in July (263 cases) and the lowest number was in December (154 cases). This trend is consistent with the rate of suicide in that country in the year 2000, as well. Researchers do not insist on one particular reason for this pattern of seasonality. The Harvard study suggests further research is neces-